

# Stimulus needs best safeguards

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With news every day of more layoffs and bankruptcies, enactment of President Barack Obama's massive economic recovery package means help is on the way. The focus now is on speed, putting people to work, getting contracts awarded and shovels in the ground quickly. As we do so, we must take pains to balance speed with care.

The public has reason to be wary. A recent wave of stories from various states about apparent corruption, fraud and "pay to play" abuses in the awarding of government contracts and other benefits has shaken confidence in the ability of government to steward public funds wisely. Add to that the lax oversight and accountability at the root of the current economic crisis and it is perfectly understandable why people are so skeptical.

State and local governments should take this to heart. As we plan to disperse billions of taxpayer stimulus dollars, we must have bidding and compliance programs that will guarantee accountability and transparency.

Here are a few measures we are trying in Massachu-

setts:

■ **State public bidding programs.**

With the stimulus, state transportation agencies, IT departments and other agencies will be flooded with bids for lucrative contracts. Speed in procurement is an important objective, particularly in the context of federal "use it or lose it" requirements that will mandate the expedited commencement of projects. However, speed must be balanced with critical public bidding protections necessary to ensure that contracts are competitively and impartially awarded based on the value and quality of the goods and services to be provided.

■ **Project monitors.**

Once contracts are awarded, state agencies need auditors to monitor the actual spending. With so much money flowing so quickly, some contractors will be tempted to submit inflated bills, or worse. Agencies must scrutinize the bills before they are paid.

■ **Web sites need to shine a light on public bidding.**

Sites like [www.mass.gov/recovery](http://www.mass.gov/recovery) will list the names of all bidders on sti-

mus contracts, post all stimulus contracts and report on the progress of work carried out under those contracts.

Without such integrity measures, we will surely pay a high price later — in the form of inefficient contracts, shoddy work and products, and expensive prosecutions of people who have committed fraud.

In the private sector, CEOs live by the truism: "Fast, Good or Cheap — Pick Two."

When it comes to an unprecedented \$800 billion stimulus package, we can have fast action to boost our economy, and it can be done well, with integrity and free from influence-peddling and corruption.

But it cannot be cheap.

We need robust audit programs, public bidding procedures and other measures that let sunshine into the bidding process and prevent insider deals.

We ought not view these needed safeguards as impediments or obstacles to be abandoned.

One of President Obama's greatest promises is to restore the public's trust in government itself. A well-designed stimulus program with robust integrity measures will be a major step in that direction.

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